

## ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

**Drama and Theatre**

From as early as 1974 there developed a wide escalation of real black theatre in South Africa. This theatre was introduced by black playwrights who sought to have a meaningful message to present to the black community. A number of such plays circulated all over the country during the period under review. However, theatre critics complained that there was no direction offered by theatre as to what Blacks could do to alleviate their situation, and that most plays sufficed to highlight the deplorable plight of Blacks in South Africa.

Most playwrights would argue that any plays more relevant were bound to invite adverse attention from the South African Government Censor Board, long before they had generated enough revenue to be worth the while. In other words this argument suggested that theatre would have to be heavily subsidised through some special sponsorship for it to be direct and to the point without fear of financial inevitability.

Much as sponsorship would help allay the financial fear of theatre producers, most independent thinking producers and directors fear the strings which are likely to come with financial grants. A theatre-seasoned Johannesburg man, Cornie Mabaso, put it this way, "some where along the line, the productions must take the form that will please your master".<sup>1</sup> Cornie Mabaso, a man with long associations with MDALI, believed that for the better development of black theatre, sponsorship would have to come on the strength of your production, rather than theatre production developing under the direction of sponsors. In a brief statement he said, "Black theatre should develop on its own . . . . not from sponsors."

As many playwrights found themselves faced with the difficult question of whether the money they wanted to raise was more important

than the preservation of genuine black theatre or not. A few opted for the pursuit of money even at the expense of genuineness of the black traditions which they purported to present in their plays. A greater number remained in the middle, offering no real solutions to black frustrations outside making attempts at dramatising day-to-day sources of such frustrations. A very limited few have produced theatre for the sake of theatre. Plays written by such people remain largely unknown outside the rehearsal halls.

Over and above the renowned playwrights in the black community, emerged a Port Elizabeth priest of the African Independent Churches, Rev. Mzwandile Maqina, with a play entitled *Give Us This Day*. The theme of Maqina's play was centred around the story of a university student who, because of his political assertions, was excluded from school and suffered many injustices because of his beliefs. This youth subsequently left his mother country for a new state where he died of a parcel bomb sent to him from an unknown person. Some observers, having seen the play, concluded that the play was dramatising the story of Onkgopotse Ramothibi Tiro. In his review of the play, Aggrey Klaaste of *Sketsh* felt that because it was a "highly volatile political story told in an almost pastoral vein, one is liable to miss the dam for the water." Despite criticism suffered by this play from black theatre critics, *Give Us This Day* toured the country and even neighbouring states like Lesotho and Botswana.

It also became the first South African play to tour as far to the north as Uganda, where it had several popular performances. The Uganda deal was clinched by the director of the play through the Uganda High Commissioner in Lesotho. *Give Us This Day* was subsequently declared objectionable by the Publications Control Board and could therefore not be staged with effect from 14 May, 1976.

The other play that crossed swords with the Publications Control Board was *Confused Mhlaba* written by a Port Elizabeth author and playwright, Khayaletu Mqhayisa. The play, banned in September 1975, was brought before the Publications Appeal Board by Mr Mqhayisa's publishers, Ravan Press, in March 1976. *Confused Mhlaba* portrayed the ups and downs which were faced by a former Robben Island prisoner in the course of his rehabilitation to society with immense theatrical potential. Khaya Mqhayisa acted in this play accompanied by talented actors like Mabel Mafuya, Sam Ntsinyi and Anne Gxasheka.

Giving evidence to the Publications Appeal Board in favour of the play the Executive Director of Ravan Press, the publishers, described *Confused Mhlaba* as "a piece of literature with dramatic merit."<sup>2</sup> However, the appeal was not successful. After his very successful plays like *Unfaithful Woman* and *Blame Yourself* Soweto playwright Sam

Mhangwani came out towards the middle of 1976 with a new play *Thembi*. Sam Mhangwani, born in Alexandra, grew up with theatrical interest in him, which contributed towards his study of theatre, production and administration in Cardiff and a three months study tour in America. Sam Mhangwani runs a drama workshop at DOCC in Orlando every Sunday morning.

During the summer of 1975-76 black theatre was hit by James Mthoba's inspirational *UHlanga*. This one man show came from the same stable as *Crossroad*, *ZZZip!* and UNosilimela Johannesburg based workshop '71 theatre company. The play, devised by actor Mthoba and director Mshengu (a pseudonym for Robert Mcharen a Wits University lecturer), was specially prepared to represent South Africa at the Festival of African Art in Lagos, Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> *UHlanga* (Zulu word meaning the Reed) was a combination of a personal history of Mthoba's own life and Review of African history and experience, expressed in a series of varied roles and idioms which carry the audience across Africa with glimpses of Arab explorers; early African empires and modern South African Soweto. The play well merges the Africa past, present and the future and Vincent Kunene of *Sketsh* has this to say "Black theatres" as indicated by *UHlanga* is making great strides towards the development of black culture. *UHlanga* directly states to all of us that no man is without his perculiar indistructable form of culture even if there may be external forces seeking to eradicate it."<sup>4</sup>

The general development of genuine theatre in the black community has been hampered amongst other things by the lack of drama schools to promote and cultivate latent talent. Even at ordinary secondary day schools theatre is hardly considered as an extra mural course. One theatre organisation MDALI (Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute) whose aim has always been to promote self determination, self realisation and self support in black theatre and arts, expressed concern over the apparent ill discipline and non-direction in theatre. Talking to *Black Review* as spokesman for MDALI, Mr Molefe Phethoe, said that a programme of clinics and workshops at schools and community centres had to be organised to raise the necessary interest for the survival and growth of theatre in Black South Africa.

In the whole of the Republic of South Africa no theatres are built for the use of blacks, therefore ordinary halls act as theatres in most areas and this handicap reduces the element of good quality in black theatre in general.

## Films

Although cinema going on the part of black South Africans has become a regular habit in many urban areas of the country, Blacks themselves

have not really entered the film industry. There are no black South African film directors or producers nor is there any form of available training in this direction. Be that as it may, over the last couple of years a number of foreign film makers, especially British, have come into the country to screen locally placed films. In the course of this there have developed practice of talent hunting in amongst Blacks mainly, for the purpose of making the films typically South African. The latest development has been that of screening South African black scripted plays like David Phethoe's *MaXhosa*, Simon Sabela's *Inkedama* or Welcome Msomi's *UMabatha*, etc. Although only a few with real good potential have emerged, there are more than 300 black entertainers in the film business.

A large number of these entertainers signed a petition protesting against the British Film Technician's Union ban on their members accepting employment on films made in South Africa, a move apparently designed to mark objection to South African Apartheid policies in entertainment.

By May 1976 the British Actors Union, Equity, was in the process of voting on a similar proposal to bar its members totally from working in South Africa. Organised by a British Film Director, Peter Colinson, the South African black film entertainers expressed that they would lose in all sorts of ways if the ban was enforced.<sup>5</sup>

Another threat to South African film making which put the position of black film stars in jeopardy was the apparent reluctance on the part of film companies to invest any large sums of money on new films until they had fully assessed the effects of television which has been in operation in South Africa since the beginning of 1976. Discussing the issue, one black actor, Ray ka Msengana, said that black actors had either to catch up with international movies which was difficult, or wait for local black movies which were inclined to run on ethnic lines thus offering little for the actor who intended hitting the top. "We have actually been attacked by many people who say we are propagating separate development by producing films in the Blacks' languages and we cannot have any strong argument against this," said Mr Msengana.<sup>6</sup> He added, "The answer is in producing films with black background in English so that all Blacks including Coloureds and Indians can participate together and improve the potential of the industry." The other problem faced by black actors was that television had offered no opportunity for Blacks because it was not an open channel to suit the interest of the majority of South African citizens.

## **Music**

In the music scene, while all types of music, jazz, blues, Afro-rock (Mbaqanga), pop, classic, traditional, non-instrumental vocals, etc.,

remained in vogue over the past year, jazz appears to have kept the tradition of being fairly well organised all over the countryside. This, as has always been the case in the past, contributed to the populous turnout when big festivals were called.

The jazz festival which topped the list was organized in Botswana by the South African Students Movement (SASM) during the cultural week. The objective behind the organization of this jazz festival was to promote black culture whilst instilling a sense of pride in Blacks with regard to their culture. Black artists from all over the world like, Letta Mbuli who roused ecstasy in the audience because of her authentic African music, Caiphus Semeya altoist singer and composer from America, Kent Brindley guitarist of the Crusaders, Jonas Gwangwa composer, arranger, pianist, trombonist now based in Boston, and many other artistes from overseas, featured in the programme. Amongst local groups who participated were the Beaters known for their good music, Dudu Phukwana a Port Elizabeth alto saxophonist, Dollar Brand the famous South African pianist, the Jazz Ministers from Johannesburg, a jazz group from Mdantsane led by Ndiphiwe Sihawu and various other groups from South Africa.

An art exhibition was also held during the same week, to encourage Black artists to display their paintings and sculpture. Seminars were organised before the actual musical shows were staged. At these seminars poetry was discussed revolving around the black man's way of life. Assessment was made on the role of a black artist in the black man's existential situation.

Thousands of people from all over Africa flocked to Botswana to witness black talents live. Everybody left having been saturated with authenticity depicted by Blacks on the stage. Miss Letta Mbuli gave the crowd a message that Blacks must carry on doing the right thing.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>*Sketsh Summer 1975*

<sup>2</sup>*Rand Daily Mail 11.3.76*

<sup>3</sup>*Daily Dispatch 3.1.76*

<sup>4</sup>*Sketsh Summer 1975*

<sup>5</sup>*Star 31.5.76*

<sup>6</sup>*Daily Dispatch 8.5.76*